

Social Media Preferences: A Qualitative Analysis of Student Social Media Choices

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Introduction

Since 70% of adult internet users log onto Facebook daily and 23% maintain a Twitter account¹, the importance of effective use of social media has never been greater. This study follows the framework of Uses and Gratifications Theory, which suggests that users look for and at content that satisfies certain needs or desires². There has been little research done pertaining to social media in organizations that is qualitative³, so this study seeks to address these needs from a new angle.

RQ1: What type(s) of content do students look to university-affiliated organizations’ social media for?

RQ2: What differences, if any, exist between the type(s) of content students want to see from university—affiliated organizations’ social media and commercial social media?

Materials and Methods

Interviews were conducted with six participants selected from a convenience sample of ISU Honors students to investigate social media preferences. Interviews were conducted in the Jischke Honors building and ranged from 5:40 minutes to 19:50 minutes, with transcriptions ranging from two pages to five pages. Participants were asked questions relating to their current social media habits, their likes and dislikes relating to University-affiliated social media, and their likes and dislikes relating to commercial/brand social media. Questions included:

“Can you think of a University-affiliated social media account that you particularly like the content of, and tell me what you like about their posts/account?”

Results

The data collected from interviews was analyzed through thematic analysis. Two themes with corresponding subthemes were identified.

- **Relevance** – having a connection to the participant, their interests, or to the purpose of the account
 - **Locality** – an account pertaining to an organization that is small and operated locally (not a chain)
 - **Useful information** - posts contained information that would add value or be helpful in students’ daily life
 - **Inundation** – too many posts creating an overload in the eyes of the user
- **Entertainment** – posts generating enjoyment or amusement
 - **Humor** – posts were funny and comedic
 - **Visuals** – posts made use of pictures rather than just text

Participant interviews produced strong support for “relevance” and “entertainment” as major themes. When asked about what would cause them not to follow a university-affiliated organization, one participant stated:

“If it’s just not relevant to what I’m looking at [that platform] for. If that information isn’t relevant to me.”

Participants also expressed an affinity for content from local organizations, saying “That would be where I draw the line, if it’s local and if it affects me. But if it’s a national, large brand or chain, it doesn’t feel as relevant to me.” Participants favored content that was useful or helpful to them. “I follow them if they’re adding more than just a product, like if I’m getting information or news from them.” Finally, when participants felt overwhelmed or inundated by posts from an account, they were less interested in following that account. “I’ve unfollowed people because they post way too much.”

Students were also found to place value on the entertainment they found in posts. One participant referenced an account that was:

“Informative, yet not boring. It’s more engaging.”

The main tenet of entertainment was humor, meaning participants looked for comedic posts. “I mean they’re funny, who doesn’t follow them.” Participants also had a strong preference for visual posts over text-based posts. “Pictures are helpful. Sometimes if they’re just posting words, I’ll scroll past it, whereas if it’s a gif or a picture or a video, I’ll usually stop and look at it.”

Conclusion

The provided themes provide useful answers to the two initial research questions, which fit well within the Uses and Gratifications framework. Students look to University-affiliated social media for content that will entertain them, and be relevant and useful in their everyday lives and educational experiences. Participants also suggested that differences did exist between social media affiliated with a brand versus the University, due to their purpose and difference in audience. Most preferred University-affiliated social media because it pertained more to their experience, but said that businesses could have success on social media if they avoided posting too often and added value, such as humor, to their posts beyond just self-promotion. While this study was limited in its number and variety of participants, it provides insight regarding social media specifically relating to University settings.

References

1. Rubenking, B. & Rister, A. (2016). A look at user motivations with restaurant brands on Facebook and Twitter. *Florida Communication Journal*, 44, 11-23.
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A Picture’s Worth a Thousand Data Points

University Honors Program

Objectives

RQ1: What type of Instagram posts (in terms of content) create more engagement among student users?

RQ2: What time of day is optimal to post on Instagram in order to create maximum engagement among student users?

RQ3: What is the optimal frequency of posts to create maximum engagement among student users?

Methods

Three variables were measured through a 15-week manipulation of the University Honors Program Instagram account.

1. **Content Type**
 1. Event Reminders
 2. Event Photos
 3. General Honors
 4. Student Recognition
 5. General ISU
2. **Frequency**
 1. 1 post per week
 2. 3 posts per week
 3. 5 posts per week
3. **Timing**
 1. Morning (6am-10am)
 2. Midday (10am-2pm)
 3. Afternoon (2pm-6pm)
 4. Night (6pm-10pm)

Results

Response to each variable was evaluated by calculating the number of likes received on a post within 48 hours as a percentage of the number of followers at the time of the post. The mean percentage of likes/followers was 9.06%.

None of the variables were found to be significant predictors of likes/engagement.

Conclusions

The lack of significant results for each variable demonstrates the unpredictability and range across social media. The growth of a 66-account follower base can be considered a success that will hopefully continue to see growth.

Acknowledgments

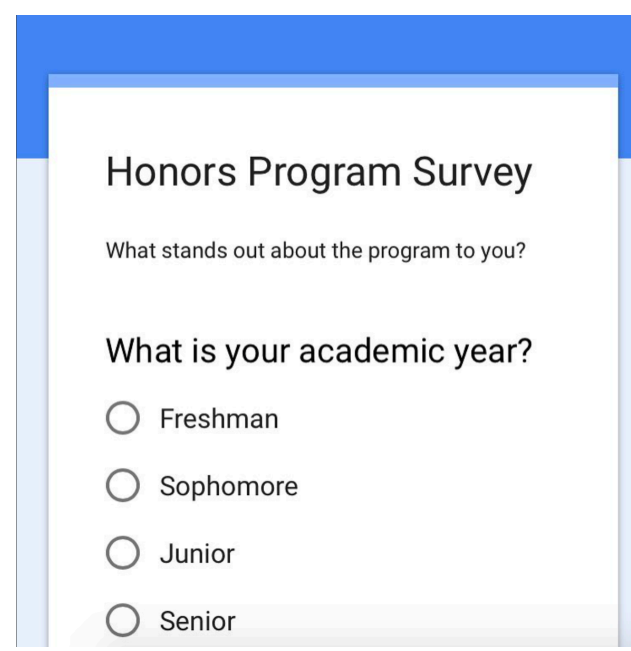
Thank you to Dr. Racheal Ruble for her guidance on both studies.



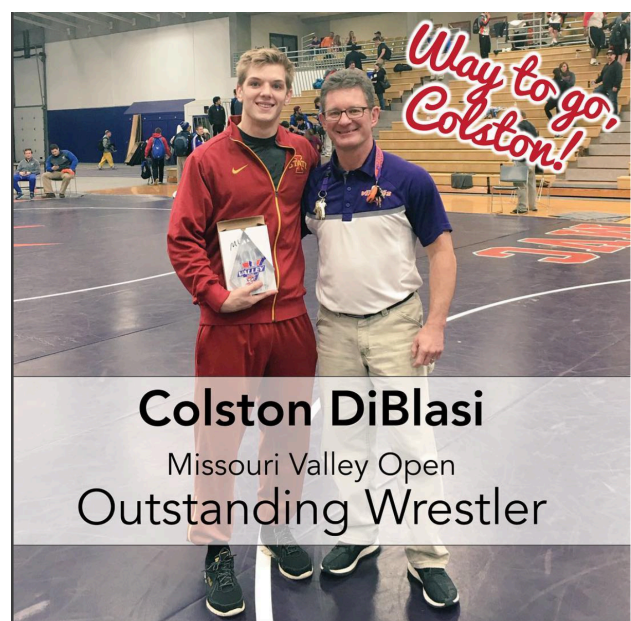
Event Reminders



Event Photos



General Honors



Student Recognition



General ISU